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Kirk. Breckinridge  
ADDRESS  
Baltimore  
TO THE  
*with respect*  
GRADUATES IN JEFFERSON COLLEGE,  
*from the author*  
DELIVERED ON THE

DAY OF COMMENCEMENT,

September 27th, 1838.

By M. BROWN, President.

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## ADDRESS.

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GENTLEMEN,

Among the various topics which might be profitably discussed on this occasion, I invite your attention particularly to "*Independence of mind.*" This is a character universally admired, yet rarely possessed and little understood. It may be considered as of similar import with *moral courage*, *decision of character*, and *firmness of purpose*. We shall consider it as it has been well defined, "That state of mind, in which a man firmly resolves to do his duty without any anxious regard to consequences."

This firmness and independence of mind, in order to be entitled to the character of a virtue, must be founded on *principle*—a conscientious regard to truth and duty. It is not a blind instinct, or the result of mere constitutional organization. There is no doubt a courage which is merely constitutional and *physical*. But this possesses in itself no *moral* excellence. It may be the result of insensibility or foolhardiness: It may be prompted by blind passion, urging fearlessly into danger without consideration. This kind of courage may be found in the highest degree, among the most degraded and savage tribes of men, or even among the inferior animals. The goaded ox, the war-horse, not to mention the lion or other wild beasts of the forest, may, in this attribute, rival the greatest hero that ever exposed his life in the field of battle. The courage we recommend, is a rational thing, founded on knowledge, deliberation, a sense of moral obligation, and directed by purity of motive. This firmness and independence of mind is particularly requisite in the *investigation* and *reception* of truth, and in the *active duties* of life. Indeed the whole duty of man is included in these two particulars, *faith* and *practice*, or what we are to *believe* and what we are required to *do*.

With regard to the first, there are two points deserving special consideration. 1. The importance of Truth itself. 2. Man's *responsibility* for his belief.

The man of moral independence of mind, will appreciate the truth, will search for it with a sincere desire to find it, and with a diligence and perseverance suited to its value. Truth is a sacred thing. It is *radical* and lies at the foundation of all virtuous action. Error tends only to evil. This is universally true on every subject. All excellence and success in science, in the arts and in the various occupations of life, depend on accurate knowledge of the *truth of things* as they really are. The physician, the lawyer, the farmer, mechanic and merchant know the importance of ascertaining the exact state of things, as they are, in their various departments, and act accordingly, when they act wisely.

The opinion which has become so very prevalent, especially with regard to moral and religious subjects, "that truth is indifferent," and that "it matters not what a man believes," is one of the most absurd and dangerous, that can be conceived. Error in principle necessarily leads to error in practice. Who does not see this in relation to the common concerns of life? Who would trust a physician, ignorant in his profession, or mistaken with regard to the nature of his disease and the appropriate remedy? Who would employ a lawyer that would not give himself the trouble of examining the cause with which he is entrusted? In like manner with regard to the farmer, mechanic or merchant. How much more unreasonable and dangerous to maintain the indifference of opinion and the innocence of error with regard to *morals* and the infinitely important relations of man to his fellow creatures, to his God, and the retributions of eternity? Here it is that the belief or rejection of truth is of the most vital importance, as it has a direct influence on *practice* and is essentially connected with the highest interests of man throughout the whole of his existence.

It is deeply to be regreted that the sage of Monticello, has long since given the sanction of his popular name to the sentiment so prevalent, "that error is innocent, when reason is left free to combat it—that it matters not, whether a man believes in one God or twenty Gods, it neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." But is it not obvious that a man's character and conduct will be in accordance with the character of the divinity he adores and loves? If he worships a God who approves of theft, he will be a thief and not hesitate to "pick his neighbor's pocket." If he be a worshipper of Mars or a God who delights in blood, he will be a murderer, and not hesitate "to break his neighbor's leg," or take his life. If he be a worshipper of Bacchus, he will of course be a drunkard. If he deny the existence of a God or a future state, he will cast off all restraint and moral obligation. Who will trust a man that denies all moral obligation, and would maintain that murder, theft, robbery, treason and licentiousness of every kind, were in themselves harmless, or matters of indifference? What would be the consequence of the general prevalence of such sentiments? Certainly, licentiousness in practice, leading to all manner of crimes, destructive to the peace, safety and the very existence of society. In illustration of the appropriate effects of such principles we might refer not only to the history of Pagan nations, the habitations of cruelty and all manner of pollution and crime, but also to the recent history of revolutionary France.

In connexion with the importance of truth and the danger of error, it would seem to be an obvious consequence that *man is responsible* for his *belief*. Yet we find a contrary sentiment has become very prevalent. It has been boldly avowed, that man is *not* responsible for his belief—that he is not to blame for his opinions however erroneous and dangerous they may be. It is alleged that he is bound by a kind of *fatality*—an irresistible necessity; that he is a mere creature of circumstances; that his character is formed entirely by the impressions made by surrounding objects, and that there is no possible sense

in which his character, belief or actions could be different from what they are. This is one of the most prevalent forms which infidelity has assumed at the present time; and it is obvious, none can be more pernicious. It strikes directly at the root of all moral obligation, and so far as it prevails, tends to all manner of licentiousness and crime. It is to be deeply regretted that these licentious opinions have been diffused to an alarming extent among certain classes of society, and especially those of foreign importation. Formerly infidelity was more confined to the higher classes of the community, and so long as the metaphysical infidelity and atheism of Hume and others was confined to a few sceptical philosophers, it was comparatively harmless; but in our times the poison has infected the *mass*. These destructive errors have been shaped and modified so as to be adapted to the lowest and most ignorant grades of the community. Hence, no doubt, that recklessness and insubordination to law. Hence those mobs, riots, lynchings, robberies and murders, so alarmingly prevalent in our country and threatening destruction to our republican institutions.

Now it is readily admitted that we are powerfully affected by surrounding objects, and that circumstances have great influence in forming the characters of men; but it is not admitted that man is entirely the "creature of circumstances," as we find men in the same circumstances not only different but directly opposite in their characters and conduct.

It is also admitted that the human understanding uniformly decides according to the evidence clearly presented to the mind for the time being: and in this sense our judgment or belief may be said to be necessary and unavoidable. But when we consider the influence of our feelings, passions and prejudices, in precluding or perverting the evidence itself, it is obvious that our decisions are controlled by the dispositions of the *heart*, and are therefore the proper object of approbation or blame. A judge may give his decision in perfect accordance with the testimony as presented and received, but if he should, from partiality or any improper bias, refuse to receive the *whole* testimony, or should admit only such parts of testimony as would aid the party he is disposed to favor, who would not charge such a judge with gross partiality and corruption?

Thus it is in the decisions of the human understanding. Although we cannot avoid assenting to evidence as it is presented and perceived by the mind, yet we have a power of attending or not attending to it.—We may close our eyes against the light; we may turn away from the truth which we do not love and dwell exclusively on its opposite, and thus completely bias the judgment and adopt at length any sentiments which are agreeable to our passions and prejudices.

The influence of the heart on the decisions of the judgment, is generally acknowledged among mankind and they act accordingly. Hence, in courts of justice, interest or prejudice is always considered sufficient to invalidate the force of testimony. And on the same principle the Scriptures of Truth account for the prevalence and the guilt of infidelity and error: "Men love darkness rather than light because their

deeds are evil :" And they are condemned " because they received not the truth, (in the love of it,) but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

If, then, you would cultivate independence of mind, in regard to *truth*, you should set a high value upon it—consider its importance in itself and its *practical* effects. You should " seek for it as silver, and search for it as hidden treasures." You will carefully guard against every thing which would prevent a cordial reception of the truth, considering *voluntary* error a practical sin, a sin of the heart; and having found the truth you will manfully maintain and contend for it at every hazard.

Let it be your determination to weigh with candour, whatever is presented for your consideration, and to form your conclusions accordingly. Guard with special care against every influence which may tend to bias and pervert your judgment, particularly from private interest, sinister views, passions and propensities.

With equal firmness and decision guard against the influences around you from the authority of men, popular opinion, the false maxims of the world—the violence of party spirit and the reproaches, opposition, or enmity, to which you may be exposed in following the dictates of your own honest convictions.

Whatever pretensions are generally made to the contrary, there are few men who have any just claim to real independence of mind. Multitudes yield themselves entirely to the opinions of others, without ever examining for themselves. Sceptics *professedly* consider Truth as of no value, and have no fixed sentiments, especially on moral subjects.—Others, too indolent to endure the labour of patient enquiry, receive their opinions on trust and adopt the maxims and sentiments of their leaders or the party to which they are attached, or as whim or interest or bigotry may direct. But there is an opposite extreme, against which young men ought specially to guard. From pretensions to superior genius and *originality*, they aim to reject the commonly received opinions of mankind. They scorn to think with the multitude—deal much in paradoxes—make great pretensions to new discoveries—talk much about the " march of mind—the *age of improvement*—the 19th century," &c.

Now it is certainly no evidence against the truth of any opinion, that it is generally received : on the contrary, when mankind have the capacity to judge and the means of information, and especially when there is a concurrence of men of superior wisdom and worth, it furnishes strong presumption in favour of the correctness of their views. It is no evidence of genius nor of real independence of thought, merely to differ from the multitude. This may proceed from vanity and a desire to appear singular, or ambition after a superiority to which there is no just claim. And, with regard to the character of originality, which is the great temptation to aspiring minds, there are seldom any just pretensions.

In Philosophy, in Morals, and especially in Theology, the pretended discoveries and improvements of modern times, are only, in fact, the erroneous theories of former ages, which have had their day, had be-

come obsolete or forgotten, and again revived under some new modification or name. It would be difficult to mention any doctrine or theory of modern times, claiming to be an original discovery, which has not been advanced centuries ago.

Independence of mind in investigating and maintaining the truth naturally leads to an independence with regard to *action*. Here, indeed, it is more palpable, and here too, it will have to encounter greater difficulties and opposition, and require the exercise of greater courage and firmness of purpose. Having honestly and sincerely endeavored to ascertain what is true, the same principle will prompt to action and determine to *do* what is *right*—to go straight forward in the path of duty, without turning to the right hand or to the left—to act agreeably to the dictates of conscience, whatever sacrifices it may require, and however it may expose to opposition, reproach and suffering.

And here let me remind you, that times of excitement and violent *party spirit* afford peculiar occasion for the exercise of mental independence and *moral courage*.

By party spirit is meant, that state of feeling which directs and controls, without any other rule than mere party connexion and interest. The evil consequences of party spirit are generally acknowledged. It disturbs the harmony of society, excites the worst passions of the heart, and sunders neighbors, families and dearest friends. And what is remarkable, controversies are often most violent in matters of minor importance, and among those who approximate nearest to each other in their views. The reason probably is, that the greater number of points in which parties agree present in more striking contrast points in which they differ. But one of the worst consequences of party spirit is, that it is calculated to level all distinctions arising from intrinsic worth, and to give elevation and consequence to the most worthless and wicked. When party violence prevails—when the contest for power and influence predominates—the question is not, “Is he honest? Is he capable? but will be *go the whole*? ”

It will occur to every one who has observed public affairs, how many have been brought into notice and elevated to office and power, by taking advantage of party excitement, by throwing themselves into the popular current, by repeating the watchword of a faction, or ranging themselves under the name of a popular leader, when these persons would forever have remained in obscurity and neglect had they been measured by any other standard. The evil is increased in our own times by the press and its abuses. In party-papers misrepresentations the most foul, are cheerfully admitted, when supposed to aid one party and expose their opponents to odium. And where there is honesty to admit nothing but the truth, the *whole* truth is not admitted. Information, facts, arguments, and even public documents necessary to give a correct view of the whole ground, are excluded. In this state of things, whether in political or ecclesiastical controversy, truth is perverted, motives impeached and inferences deduced from false premises or facts denied, are adopted as axioms.

The great mass of the community, whose reading is confined exclu-

sively to party publications, on one side or the other, must remain ignorant of the truth, however honest they may be. They must judge agreeably to the evidence and facts presented to them. These are partial and their conclusions, in many cases, must be false.

In warning you against the evils of party spirit, it is not meant we should remain indifferent or neutral, or form no opinions, or never *take sides* in controversy. It is the duty of every man, in all matters of interest, to form his opinion and contend for it; but what we object to, is the principle of "going the whole;" in all cases, to be governed by the *mere circumstance of party*, to vote and act with them right or wrong.—Zealous party-men make great pretensions to firmness and courage. But it is obvious it requires neither *courage*, nor *honesty*, nor *intelligence* to make a thorough going partizan. He has only to catch the watchword and observe the movement of his leaders, to think and act and vote as they do, to yield to the current and surrender his conscience to the keeping of others. On the contrary, the man of real independence, honestly determines to judge and act for himself, according to the rules of moral rectitude. Accordingly he seeks information on all sides, and decides and acts accordingly, and it requires no small degree of courage for a man to think, and speak, and act for himself, determined to follow no party, only so far as they follow truth and righteousness, and to expose himself to denunciation, when he chooses to take his own course.

The man who thus pursues the even tenor of his way, is guided by truth as his polar star, and moves onward unswerved by party or personal considerations, disregarding alike the frowns of power or the gales of popular applause; he only is the man entitled to the character of moral heroism, and when the passions, excitements and selfish interests of the day shall have passed away, impartial history will decide agreeably to truth and justice, and award to him a *permanent* and honorable fame, when demagogues and sycophants shall be forgotten, or remembered only to be despised.

It was this noble, independence of mind which distinguished the immortal Chattam, and gave to his enrapturing eloquence its principal power of control. Far superior to the paltry objects of a grovelling ambition, and regardless alike of party and personal consideration, he constantly set before him the high duties of a public man to further the interest of his species. In pursuing this course, in the language of his biographer, "he exposed himself, undaunted, to the vengeance of the court, while he battled against its corruptions, and on the other hand, confronted, unabashed, the rudest shocks of public indignation, while he resisted the dictates of pernicious *agitators*, and could conscientiously exclaim with an illustrious statesman of antiquity, 'Ego hoc animo semper fui, ut invidiam virtute partam, gloriam non invidiam putarem.'"

The principles and conduct under consideration, may be profitably illustrated and enforced by considering the characters of La Fayette and Talleyrand, as they have been contrasted.

These remarkable men were co-temporaries during a long life and

one of the most eventful periods of European history. They had survived three generations, and had passed through all the convulsions and revolutions of France. Each acted a most conspicuous part in the terrible drama of the republic and the empire. But in comparing the lives of these illustrious men, we see a remarkable contrast. "Lafayette had abiding and fixed principles which *controled* external circumstances, instead of yielding to them. Talleyrand scarcely had any other principle than that of yielding to circumstances, and seeking to derive advantage to himself. The one had an unbending conscience which never bargained for accommodation with what he considered his duty. The conscience of the other was flexible, pliant and accommodated itself without difficulty to all influences and all situations." The former has left behind him the reputation of an honest man, an upright, devoted citizen, a man of benevolence, a hero risking every danger and submitting to great privations and sufferings for the good of mankind. "The other has left the reputation of an expert diplomatist, and a statesman of superior ability, but destitute of moral principle, bending before power that it might not crush him, and never advancing towards his object, but from selfish motives and through a thousand by-paths."

They both rendered important services to their country, in different circumstances, but who would not prefer the *unsullied* fame of the prisoner of Olmutz, to the justly disputed glory of the Prince of Benivento!

This moral heroism and independence of mind, in opinion and action, based upon the eternal principles of rectitude, we earnestly recommend and urge you to cherish and cultivate, at this particular crisis of your lives. You are soon to go forth into a world replete with peril. You enter upon the stage of public life in a time of great excitement. Amidst the "war of elements" which agitate society, civil, social and religious, the issues of which no man can foresee; your principles, your honesty and courage, may be subjected to the severest test.—"Acquit yourselves like men; be strong in the Lord and the power of his might."

The course which I have recommended might be urged by various motives. You have seen that is the most dignified, and in the end, the most *honorable* course. It is necessary to secure confidence, for no man will confide in him, who is expected to shrink from duty in the hour of trial. It is the only *safe* course: other principles of action; the popular maxims of the world; the frowns or favor of men; selfish interests, are exceedingly changing and uncertain. But the principles of truth and rectitude are unchanging and eternal. This course is also necessary to true *happiness*, in this life and that which is to come. A state of mind, governed by no fixed principles, vacillating, uncertain and agitated by changing circumstances, is in itself an unhappy state. Besides, the man who, from cowardice, or interest, or ambition sacrifices moral principle, destroys that peace of conscience, the loss of which cannot be compensated by any earthly good. When he knows that his *public* professions and acts are contrary to his own convictions, and it may be contrary to his own *private* and confidential professions, he must feel a degrading sense of *meanness*, and while he de-



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spises himself he knows that he is, and deserves to be, despised by others. But the man who resolutely does his duty, whatever reproaches he may experience from others, has the approbation of his own mind. He stands erect with composed and undaunted countenance, amidst surrounding dangers and enemies, and when all around him may be dark and stormy he has light and peace within—the approbation of his conscience and his God. He can say, “none of these things move me.” Secure of the smiles of heaven, he can look on death itself with serenity, and to the world beyond, with “hope that maketh not ashamed.” Ah! it is this hope above every other motive, which should animate and sustain us through the arduous duties and dangers of life. Think how unimportant the fallible tribunal of public opinion, compared with the impartial bar of God—how insignificant the fading and momentary honors of the world, compared with the unsading and eternal glories of heaven. Think of the palms of victory—the unsading laurels—the crown of glory reserved for those who overcome. Look up to the “cloud of witnesses”—a splendid cloud—a *galaxy* of celestial luminaries. There you see the noble army of martyrs and heroes, who, having finished their course and obtained the victory, now shine as stars in the firmament.

And now we command and commit you to God, as your only guide and protector. Cherish an habitual sense of your *dependence* on Him. Sensible of your own insufficiency, look to him for wisdom and strength. Let his *will* be your only guide, and his *glory* your supreme end. Commit yourselves to him as your God and Saviour now and forever. He will never leave nor forsake you. He will sustain you through the trials of life. He will cheer you when you pass through the dark valley of death, and grant you an abundant entrance into his Heavenly Kingdom.

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